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ABSTRACT

The author discusses 18 good ideas for sociology graduate students to keep in mind as they prepare to become professional teachers in the field. The first six suggestions deal with documenting teaching experience. Graduate teaching assistants should keep a file containing descriptions of specific teaching methods, grading techniques, outlines of lectures, and syllabi. The file should also contain written evaluations by students, faculty, or fellow graduate students. Experience in broad survey courses and in courses related to the student's field of interest is recommended. Experience in other settings such as community colleges is also useful. Membership in professional sociological associations ensures awareness of the current state of the field. Suggestions seven through 11 explain how to construct a job vita. It should include concise descriptions of major teaching experiences, and should indicate that additional materials can be furnished upon request. Persons identified to give job references should have first hand knowledge of the student's teaching abilities. Suggestions 12 through 18 focus on interviewing techniques. Students should be able to express their philosophy of teaching sociology, be up to date about issues in the field, be ready to teach a mock course, and provide course outlines for specific courses they would like to teach. (AV)

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ON TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE SOCIOLOGY
a project of the american sociological association

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TEACHER DEVELOPMENT GROUP

# PREPARING FOR TEACHING: SUGGESTIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS OF SOCIOLOGY

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Obviously, many sociology graduate students continue to obtain teaching jobs in higher education without worrying too much about demonstrating to potential employers their overall teaching competence. But even though this sometimes happens, I think that through systematic and rational planning you are much more likely to impress potential employers with your teaching abilities. Let me describe some methods and techniques that you might use in planning your teacher preparation program.

## Documenting Teaching Experience

As compared with research scholarship which is generally considered to

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be a public activity leading to written materials such as journal articles or research monographs, teaching is often looked upon as a private affair between oneself and one's students. And given the press of events, we often do not write down descriptions of the teaching methods or techniques that we attempt in the classroom or go to the extra trouble of having these methods or techniques evaluated by others. Here are a few suggestions with regard to organizing your teacher preparation program while you are a graduate student.

1. If you are a teaching assistant or have other teaching related experience, keep a file in which you write down descriptions of all of these teaching activities. It is easy to forget many of the things that one does in the classroom, so write down descriptions of the duties that you perform, the teaching exercises and techniques that you employ in your discussion sections, your techniques for grading essay exams and papers, outlines of the lectures that you give, and so forth. Also keep in your files syllabi, exams, and other written materials from these courses. These files will be useful for planning your teaching program as a graduate student (as I will describe below) for helping job references write good letters of recommendation for you, for writing your job vita, and for organizing for your job interview.

2. Also, put into this file any evaluations by others concerning your teaching effectiveness. This might include reactions by students to your discussion groups, written evaluations concerning your teaching by faculty members or administrators, or evaluations by other graduate students. This gives you good feedback which may be useful in improving your teaching skills, but it also provides a written record of your abilities for demonstrating to potential employers your capabilities as a college teacher.

3. If you are a teaching assistant, plan your teaching assignments in graduate school as carefully as you plan your academic program. Make sure you have a variety of teaching experiences in a number of types of courses. Particularly important for most students is to have some experience in broad survey courses (e.g., Introductory Sociology) that most new faculty members will be asked to teach, and also courses in your special area of interest. Also select courses which expose you to a variety of teaching methods and teaching styles. Being a graduate teaching assistant is a natural field internship and you should view it in a manner analogous to the way that a cultural anthropologist views field work in different societies. It gives you an opportunity as a spectator to "study" different methods of teaching and of organizing classroom situations. Finally, it is important to choose teaching assignments so that you get practice advising students, conducting discussions, lecturing, and all of the other specific tasks that you are likely to perform as a college teacher. And, if you go about trying to

rationally organize your teaching assignments according to your own needs and interests, you are in a much better position to demand from the department the exact types of teaching assignments that you need for your program.

4. I think it is also important to get some teaching experience outside of the department. Teach an Extension Course off campus or teach a course at a nearby community college. It is important to convince employers that you have teaching experience, but it is even more impressive to demonstrate job experience outside of the graduate institutional setting. This is particularly important if there is any chance that you might end up teaching at a school other than a graduate institution. You may also learn a lot about teaching in other settings through this experience so that the course objectives, lesson plans, and syllabi that you show potential employers will be more realistic as a result of this outside teaching experience.

5. I think it is important to be able to demonstrate to others your professional commitment to teaching sociology. You might, for instance, consider doing such things as joining the ASA Section on Undergraduate Education, subscribing to Teaching Sociology, or participating in the local state sociological association. (Of course, there is intrinsic merit in this too. If you are seriously interested in teaching, participation in these activities also ought to help you develop your skills as a teacher.)

6. Finally, make sure and keep records of any teacher training activities in which you engage. This might include education courses, workshops, and seminars on education off-campus or sponsored by other units within the university, or sociology department teacher preparation activities. Again, memory is a tricky thing so that you should keep a file of written materials related to these events and write down descriptions of the things that you do and learn associated with these teacher preparation activities.

Constructing a Job Vita

7. Especially if you want a job in a teaching-oriented institution, put on your vita descriptions of your major teaching experience. Vita descriptions should be short and concise but should be informative with regard to the number of students you taught, the exact nature of your teaching responsibilities, teaching innovations you attempted, and so forth. In your cover letter you can also indicate what additional and more detailed materials are available to the interested department.

8. When you send out job vita, indicate in the covering letter that you will be willing to send to potential employers additional written materials related to your teaching. And should the need arise, be able to send these employers more detailed information about the courses you have previously taught, courses you are prepared to teach in the future, and the evaluations by others of your teaching effectiveness.

9. Make sure that some of your job references have actual first-hand knowledge of your teaching. Often students select job references on the basis of their supposed prestige in the field (which may or may not actually be perceived by others outside the department) and their scholarly interests

but neglect completely the issue of whether or not any of these persons have direct knowledge of their teaching. If you have kept a good teaching file, you will also be able to help your references write good letters of recommendation by providing them with relevant data about your teaching experiences. Remember, that they forget things too, and even if a teaching experience is a shared one it may be useful for them to read over your notes about the things that you actually did in those courses with them a few years ago.

10. Be proud that you are a good teacher. I can think of few instances where being ashamed of your interest and talents as a teacher will actually assist you in getting a job. If it is a teaching oriented institution, snobbiness toward teaching is obviously a threat to the self-esteem of your potential employers. And even in research oriented institutions be prepared to argue that your interest in teaching makes you a better scholar and researcher -- it helps you work out the assumptions related to your perspective, construct new and better theoretical arguments, visualize additional applications for the abstract principles in your conceptions, and learn to communicate your scholarly ideas. Thus, it is precisely because you are so professional and because you are so committed to research scholarship that you dare not neglect the development of your teaching capacities and potentials. But, in any instance, think out very carefully why you are actually interested in teaching and be able to communicate this to others in ways that fit into the general job requirements of the type of position to which you are applying.

11. Also be prepared to communicate to potential employers about your teaching preparation and about the teaching experiences that you have had as a graduate student. If there is a teacher preparation program in your department, take full advantage of this fact in applying for jobs. You will need to develop for yourself a conception of how your participation in this teacher preparation program has actually prepared you for the type of teaching job for which you are applying. (If there is not a teacher preparation program in your department, demand that one be developed or, better yet, organize one yourself.)

Interviewing for Teaching Positions

If the department to which you are applying has the resources to interview prospective teachers then you have additional opportunities to demonstrate your teaching skills and potentials.

12. Take along to the job interview written materials about your teaching experiences and training: course syllabi, teaching exercises, lesson plans, and evaluations of your teaching. Be prepared to document your case for why you think potential employers should be favorably impressed with your teaching abilities.

13. Organize your thoughts regarding your teaching so that you can actually communicate your general philosophy of teaching sociology: what are you trying to accomplish? How do you go about accomplishing these worthwhile things? How do you think that students best learn sociology? Etc. There may be dangers of course in being too explicit about your teaching

philosophy. As with scholarship, when you take definite stands there is always the potential of offending people. But I think that for many of us at least it is good to have some definite space to stand on with regard to teaching and that you look (and are) more credible if you have a vision about what teaching sociology is really about.

14. Besides a general philosophy of education, I think it is important that you work out in detail plans for how you would teach one or two specific sociology courses. Most generally, I think this ought to be Introductory Sociology and a specialized course in your major field of interest. For this course, you should have a syllabus, an outline of course goals and objectives, a set of selected readings, recommended course procedures, evaluation techniques, etc. Also helpful, of course, are actual experiences teaching these courses which will even further concretize observations and teaching plans.

15. In your dealings with others in the interview situation, try to model in your behavior the teaching skills and techniques that you are talking about. For instance, if you are promoting dialogue and discussion as a preferred teaching technique, then be careful really to listen to the questions you are asked and to state your opinions in such a way as to promote thinking on the part of others. And if respect for the dignity of students is a part of your educational philosophy, try to be patient with student questions and comments during the interview situation. Since words are easy to fake, astute interviewers are naturally more impressed with signs "given off" and non-verbal cues regarding your teaching than they are with your verbal utterances.

16. When job interviewing be prepared to teach a mock class or a real class on some particular topic. Being organized for this type of task may be useful in impressing your potential employers with your capabilities as a teacher.

17. Before going on an interview, read over the abstracts to the latest issue of Teaching Sociology and briefly glance at the Chronicle of Higher Education. Try to think of a few ideas relating to teaching that you can talk about in the interview situation. It may be useful in relation to various topics you deal with in the interview situation to be able to demonstrate your general familiarity with the latest literature with regard to teaching.

18. Review the Project document "20 Suggestions for Improving the Department Procedures for Hiring Teachers in Sociology" to get an idea of the types of questions you may be asked by persons in the department.

As you know, teaching sociology for many of us is a worthwhile activity because it allows us to improve our own analysis of the world while at the same time helping others to develop their own minds and potentials. What is needed are tough people who can combine a vision of what the teaching of sociology should be about with the actual skills that it takes to get and to hold jobs within the discipline.

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